CREATOR
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MONARCHS OF OUR IMPOSSIBLE GOD

"For nothing is impossible with God."
Luke 1:37

Venture with us into the world of the incredible. In one sense, everything in Creation exists because Jesus does the impossible. After all, He created the universe out of nothing (Hebrews 11:3). We're going to magnify this truth about God—***He does the impossible***—by delving deeply into the life of a truly remarkable insect.

Each August, Jesus tenderly gathers countless ***monarch butterflies***[1] from an immense region of Canada and the United States, an area of a million or more square miles. He faithfully guides them to the Sierra Madre mountains of south-central Mexico, to a speck on the map consisting of no more than a handful of acres.

Most butterflies live only 4 to 21 days. Yet monarchs born in late summer must survive ***seven months*** to complete the journey down to Mexico and back. With a world full of unpredictable winds, driving rains, scorching sunshine, and countless enemies, this would seem an impossible task for any butterfly. Christ our Creator eagerly embraces this ***apparent*** challenge! The Bible tells us that God's power is displayed in the weak things of Creation (Judges 6:15-16; 1 Corinthians 1:27-28; 2 Corinthians 12:9). So let's then turn our attention to this "miracle insect" and see Christ's glory.

"MIRACLE INSECT"

In Mexico, the monarch is known as ***mariposa monarca***. Mariposa (pronounced mar - uh - POE - suh) is Spanish for butterfly. Jesus has made Mexico the permanent refuge for mariposa monarca. It is the winter home for 20 to 30 million monarch butterflies.

Most insects, including butterflies, live out their very short lives on a small spit of land: a mountain meadow, a patch of woods, a local neighborhood, an empty lot, or a bush. A handful of insect species migrate a hundred miles/kilometers or more when weather becomes cold. The painted lady butterfly of North America (*Vanessa cardui*) and the clouded yellow butterfly in Europe (*Colias croceus*) are examples of migrating insects. The monarch has a special message for the world, however, as it ***journeys thousands of miles/kilometers*** each autumn.

Mariposa monarca

1 *Danaus plexippus*

THE ODDS ARE AGAINST THEM

The monarch is the "Gideon" of the animal world.[2] God gives this fragile creature a titanic task to show us that He is an awesome Creator! Jesus leads millions of individual monarchs 2,000 grueling miles (3,200 kilometers) across North America to Mexico, in just 75 days.[3] But first He puts these butterflies at a severe disadvantage. ***He equipped them with extremely tiny brains, paper-thin wings, and eyes that are quite nearsighted.*** (Think about it—would you willingly travel in a flimsy airplane flown by an inexperienced and myopic pilot?!) But that's not all.

If you were an insect, you would find Earth a horribly dangerous place in which to live. Terror above from birds, danger below from rodents and other insects, predators hiding in the secret corners of woods just waiting to make you their next tasty meal. But Christ, Maker of all, freely spreads His insects across the face of the world in numbers that stagger the mind. There are 160,000 species of lepidoptera[4] (butterflies and moths) alone. Still, this doesn't guarantee that you, being an insect, will survive more than a few hours or a few days. There are many birds, bats, mice, lizards, spiders, and other bugs who want to eat you!

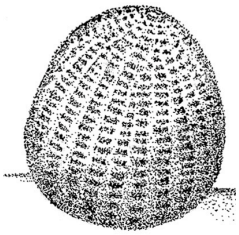
Perhaps the greatest "enemy" of butterflies, however, is harsh weather. These delicate insects quickly die at freezing temperatures. They cannot fly at night[5] and they cannot travel if it's very hot. Their fine wings are easily tattered by hail, driving rain, and wind. All this makes the story of monarch butterflies that much more incredible. As they stream by the millions in great rivers moving south toward Mexico, their brilliant orange and black become fluttering banners proclaiming our Creator's ability to do the impossible. Christ Jesus stacks the odds against the monarch to show that He is the ***God of the impossible*** (Matthew 19:26).

2 Read about Gideon in the book of Judges, chapters six through eight.
3 Monarchs start migrating in August and arrive in Mexico in November.
4 Lepidoptera is the scientific term for butterflies and moths. Lepidoptera (leh - pih - DOP - terr - ah) means "scale wing" in Greek.
5 Monarchs can't fly when the temperature drops below 55° F or 13° C.

MIRACLE UPON MIRACLE [6]

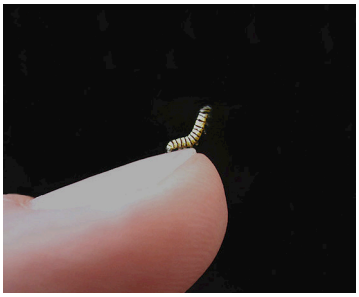
The monarch butterfly begins its unique life, and testimony to the greatness of Jesus, as a tiny egg. Despite the many disadvantages just mentioned, our Creator commands the monarch to lay all her eggs in spring and summer on the juicy leaves of the poisonous milkweed plant. God's gracious strategy then becomes apparent with a little scientific investigation.

Monarch egg (magnified)



Of the 108 species of milkweed plants in North America, the monarch butterfly utilizes a dozen or so as "nurseries." These plants (*Asclepias* sp.) contain deadly chemicals known as ***cardiac glycosides***. Cardiac glycosides are toxins that have a strong effect on the heart or ***cardiac organ*** of mammals. Sheep and cattle have been known to die after feeding in pastures populated by milkweed! All parts of the milkweed plant are poisonous, including the white "milk" or latex.

When the monarch egg hatches, an itsy-bitsy caterpillar emerges, one-eighth of an inch (one-third of a centimeter) long. Possessing 12 simple



eyes and eight pairs of legs, it immediately starts hungrily munching on the toxic milkweed leaves. But why doesn't it succumb to the poison? Our Lord Jesus has made it immune.

Over a period of three weeks, each monarch

6 "Miracles are those acts that only God can perform; usually superceding natural laws....A miracle is a sign that God uses to point to Himself." Kris Samons, Probe Ministries, "What Is a Biblical Definition of 'Miracle'?"

caterpillar molts five times and increases in weight 3,000 fold! This would be equivalent to an eight-pound (3.5 kilogram) newborn baby ballooning to 12 tons in less than a month. Now that's a big baby!

During this phenomenal growth, the caterpillar concentrates cardiac glycosides in its body. These chemicals are passed on to the adult butterfly, making it nasty tasting to would-be predators. Insectivorous[7] birds quickly learn not to eat monarchs. Jesus thus protects the species using the milkweed.[8]

The monarch caterpillar then does something quite strange and mysterious. Using liquid silk, it attaches one end of its body to the underside of a leaf or a twig, splits its skin, and Jesus converts it into a beautiful pale-green chrysalis (KRIS - uh - lis).[9]

EXTRAVAGANT GLORY

As with so much of nature, God reveals His glory in a lavish way, and the monarch is no exception. Our Lord Jesus Christ adorns its odd-shaped chrysalis with gold studs which seem to have no function other than to proclaim the royalty of its Creator! What happens to the body of the caterpillar over the course of the next three weeks is nothing short of miraculous. Most of its organs literally break down and turn to jelly. Christ's Spirit then renews them (Psalm 104:30), forming fresh tissues and organs suitable—not for a lumbering caterpillar—but a beautiful flying insect.

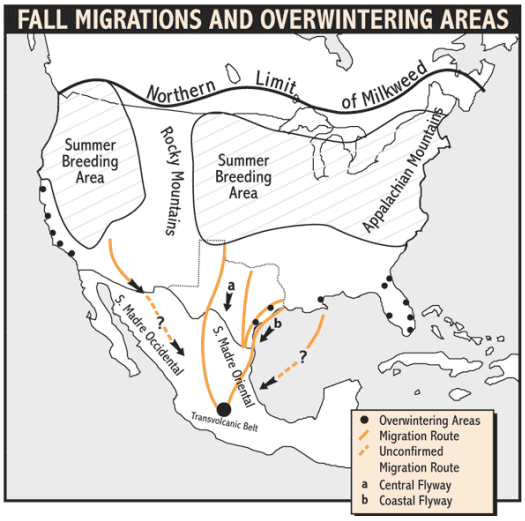
Toward the end of its development, the outer covering of the monarch chrysalis becomes transparent and we get a glimpse of the butterfly's loveliness—a "spark" from the fire of Christ's beauty! What emerges from the chrysalis is a tropical butterfly called *Danaus plexippus*.

7 Insectivorous means "insect-eating."
8 Other plants that contain cardiac glycosides include foxglove (*Digitalis* sp.), lily-of-the-valley, oleander, and dogbane.
9 A chrysalis is the pupa of a butterfly.

I say "tropical" because all other species of *Danaus* butterflies are found in the exotic places of the world. In His desire to share His Father's glory, Jesus calls the monarch butterfly from deep in the heart of Mexico to the temperate north so that people can enjoy its "tropical glory." He is a God of great kindness, isn't He?!

JOURNEY IMPOSSIBLE

As a species, monarchs can easily survive without migrating north. Millions of monarch butterflies thrive in Florida, California, Hawaii, and Australia. This makes the spring and autumn sojourns of mariposa monarca all the more incredible.



In her book *Four Wings and a Prayer*, secular author Sue Halpern compares the migration of monarchs with the journey of Israel from Egypt to Canaan. And why not? The steady hand of Christ's Spirit has led them both. "The enigmatic, improbable, long-distance, multigenerational movement of monarch butterflies has some resonance here [to the exodus of the Jews]. Since it makes so little sense that bugs, living serial lives, could find Canaan each year, and since science has not yet offered a sufficient explanation for how that happens, why not call it numinous[10] and leave it at that?"[11]

10 "Numinous" means "supernatural."
11 Sue Halpern, *Four Wings and a Prayer* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 116.

What Mrs. Halpern means by "serial lives" and "multigenerational" is that mariposa monarca migrating north from Mexico each March die shortly after laying eggs in Texas and other southern U.S. states. These eggs then hatch into caterpillars which, in turn, transform into a new generation of butterflies. This "second" generation travels further north, laying eggs as they go, thus creating a third population of monarchs. These make their way into the northern United States and Canada by May, June, and July, forming a fourth generation of insects. It is this northern-most population of monarch butterflies (the great-grandchildren of the original Mexican population) that eventually make the arduous—no, impossible—journey back to the Neovolcanic Mountains west of Mexico City, ***a trip they have never made before and for which they have no map!***[12]

THE LORD OUR SHEPHERD

What triggers the monarchs' return to Mexico in autumn? The butterfly somehow "knows" that God wants it to move south (see map on page 3). Jesus might use the shortening days and decreasing daylight to signal "It's time to go!" These minute migrants are very purposeful; they now seem anxious to reach their winter home. In fall, monarch butterflies are especially friendly toward one another and usually travel south in enormous groups reaching millions in number. The sky of their migratory routes is often "painted" orange and black. Multi-colored clouds of monarchs become so thick in Mexico that they actually stop automobile traffic and cause car accidents!

Along the way, our Lord Jesus provides His glorious army of butterflies numberless flowers[13] upon which to briefly rest and drink sweet nectar—not unlike the manna of Israel. Christ intimately watches over His Creation like a loving shepherd caring for his sheep (Psalm 23).

Can we imagine God using some invisible means, a "shepherd's staff" if you will, to gently guide His fragile, winged creatures? (Read Ezekiel 1:20.) How else can we explain it? Science fails. And besides, ***science should never be divorced from the hand of God***. Dr. Fred Urquhart marvels "how such a fragile, wind-tossed scrap of life can find its way (only once!) across prairies, deserts, mountain valleys, even cities, to [a] remote pinpoint on the map of Mexico."[14] I am convinced that each monarch hears and follows the sweet voice of Jesus, their Creator, all the way from Canada to Central America.

JEHOVAH-NISSI

"Unbelievable! What a glorious, incredible sight!" exclaims a monarch scientist who for the first time observes millions of monarch butterflies miraculously congregating at their Mexican over-wintering sites in the forests of ***oyamel fir*** (*Abies religiosa*).[15]

When we realize the impossibility of monarch migration, we can't help but rejoice in our Lord. As Creator, He tenderly and faithfully guides this small orange-and-black insect. ***Jesus is Jehovah Nissi*** (nis - SEE), "The LORD Our Banner" and "The LORD My Miracle!"[16] As the Good Shepherd, He will never abandon those He has appointed to carry the banner of His Father's glory. And the monarch butterfly is one such miraculous banner! ❑

12 The longest distance any monarch has been known to travel is an incredible 2,880 miles (4,635 kilometers)!
13 Typically red clover, milkweed, butterfly weed, goldenrod, asters, rabbitbrush, and thistle flowers
14 Fred A. Urquhart, "Found at Last: The Monarch's Winter Home" *National Geographic Magazine*, August 1976, 173.
15 Ibid., 161.
16 Exodus 17:15

THE MIRACLE OF REBIRTH

Most people, I think, take the existence of a butterfly or a moth for granted. Yet in the truest sense, they represent one life being born from another. If we examine how these fascinating insects transform, it becomes obvious that God, and only God, is the One who can change them from "ugly ducklings" into "beautiful swans."

The means by which a caterpillar turns into a butterfly or a moth is called ***metamorphosis***. There are four stages in their lives: egg, caterpillar (larva), pupa (chrysalis), and adult. It is within the ***pupa*** that the really unbelievable takes place—the mysterious power of Christ converts the caterpillar into a ***completely different insect***.

A caterpillar's main goal in life is eating and growing. Most of us are all too familiar with the voracious appetites of caterpillars and the damage they can do to trees and vegetables! They feed ravenously for about two or three weeks, shedding their skin several times to make room for their rapidly expanding bodies.

Eventually the caterpillar stops eating (WHEW!) and looks for a place to become a ***pupa*** (PEW - pah). This often occurs by hanging from the branch of a small tree or plant; sometimes it happens underground.

Our Lord Jesus does not simply "rearrange the furniture" of the insect's body hidden away in the darkened room of the pupa; essentially the caterpillar is "gutted" and its insides are replaced with entirely new organs! In his book *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, Dr. Michael Denton explains that the caterpillar becomes "a veritable soup of fragmented cells and tissues."[1] According to Peter Farb, the pupae[2] of butterflies and moths may appear dead but in reality "are engaged in [a] furious rearrangement of their tissues."[3]

1 Michael Denton, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, (Bethesda MD: Adler & Adler, 1986), 147.
2 ***Pupae***, pronounced PEW - pea, is plural for ***pupa*** (PEW - pah).
3 Peter Farb, *Insects*, (New York: Time Inc., 1962), 58.

Monarch pupa

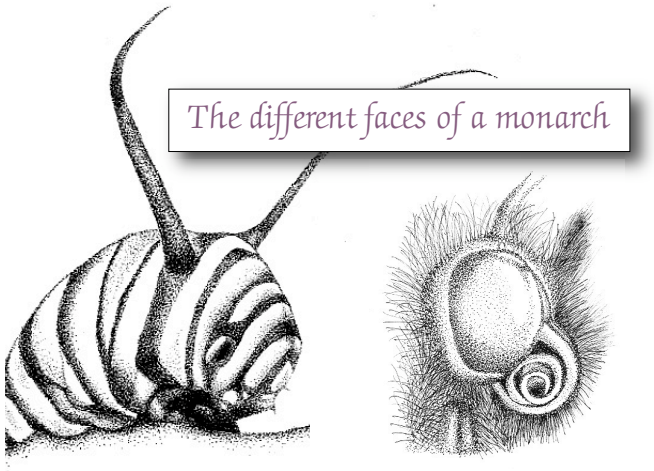
The caterpillar's muscles, skin, antennae, intestines, mouth, and legs turn to liquid. In their place, new organs and tissues and legs are rapidly created by Christ. Other organs and tissues, such as nerves, air passages, heart, blood vessels, and "kidneys" do not disappear but are miraculously transformed into new organs and tissues. The wings and eyes of the butterfly—not present in the caterpillar—God makes from scratch!

Our Creator works these changes for some very practical reasons. The remodeling of the caterpillar's stomach, for instance, allows the butterfly to enjoy an entirely different diet, which also allows it to move about. The caterpillar mainly munches the leaves of plants in a very small area; a butterfly or moth sucks up the sweet nectar of flowers both near and far. And the muscles used by the lumbering caterpillar for creeping and crawling are very different from the muscles needed by the butterfly to flutter and flap. Ultimately, Jesus performs these changes within the pupa (chrysalis) so that we can see what a remarkable God He is!

For a short period of time during this rebirth, parts of the ***old caterpillar nervous system*** are found side-by-side with portions of the ***new butterfly nervous system***. How can two nervous systems coexist in the same creature? Many of the brand-new nerves remain quiet until they're ready to be activated in the adult insect. How the pupa knows when to turn these nerves on and off is an enigma. What is clear is that all this is controlled by our mysterious God. Miraculous though it is, the old nervous system remains until it is no longer needed and then it simply disappears.

Farb writes that "the human mind has long been unable to comprehend the strange growth and development of most insects from egg to wormlike larva, then to an inert pupa, and from that to emergence as a winged adult."[4] It's almost as if Jesus is daring us to try and explain butterfly metamorphosis.

Dr. Denton goes on to say, "the ways in which the adult organ systems are formed during metamorphosis are bewilderingly diverse in different species."[5] We can be sure that God does this for His own pleasure and to show us that He is the God of the impossible!



Head of caterpillar Head of butterfly

We can be comforted by the love and attention our Lord Jesus gives to the butterfly and the moth throughout their lives. The pupa and the young butterfly are very vulnerable and potentially in grave danger from predators because they cannot move. Yet God protects them. How much more does Jesus protect us day after day? Those who believe in Christ can be "confident of this, that He who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). We, like the butterfly, are very fragile and our Heavenly Father delights in sustaining us through His Son and by His Spirit.

The butterfly is a beautiful symbol of Christ's Spirit present throughout nature. The Spirit of God, who causes the transformation of the caterpillar into a butterfly, is the same Spirit who brings us into a personal relationship with the living God, when we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And this change is no less impossible!

By nature, we all hate God. Oh, we may not think so, but our whole lives are set in rebellion against our Creator. In some people, God works a miracle to get them to see how depraved they truly are. It is His Spirit who gently, but firmly, leads them to recognize their wickedness before God, repent of their sins, believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that He died on a cross for their sins, and rose again from death to provide them eternal life in Himself. It is God's Holy Spirit who also gives them the desire and strength to obey God, and live a life that honors Christ. Do you want to be one of them?

You, too, can know the love of our Creator—***the God of the Impossible***. But He must first work the impossible in you! Ask Him right now to do that which only He can do in your heart, turning you from hating God to cherishing Him through Jesus!

"Oh, Father in Heaven, I confess that I have lived my life in rebellion against You, and this is sin. Please forgive me through Your Son, Jesus Christ—through His death on the cross. Jesus, please come into my heart right now. I embrace You as my all-powerful God, my sweet Savior, and my Eternal Life. Show me how to live the way You want me to live, and allow me to see and hear Your praises throughout the universe! In Your name, Lord Jesus Christ, I pray. Amen." ❑

4 Farb, *Insects* 55.
5 Denton, *Evolution* 148.

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